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# There and Back Again: Learning From the History of a Freshman Seminar Sequence

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Teaching does not happen in a vacuum just as good courses do not fall from the sky in whole cloth. How and what we teach is woven from any number of past or present influences that include, for instance, tradition, conversation with colleagues, student requests, job market demands, curriculum committees, popular culture, academic advances in a field, or how an academic unit has developed over time. Many honors programs or colleges, however, teach a course sequence that is anchored in the classics and has core texts that one might think are somewhat immune to change. While all such course sequences had a beginning and a developmental trajectory, I would wager that often their genesis is forgotten even if the success of the honors program or college rests on them. Remembering the roots, however, serves as a touchstone when pedagogical or developmental crossroads arise. Knowing why a course was originated and how it developed can facilitate decision-making, clarify the program's mission, and allow experimentation without losing the program's focus. Historical consideration of the genesis and development of a course sequence teaches us how to gain institutional support, develop a foundation, achieve collaboration inside and outside the program, and enhance faculty development.

The evolution of The Human Event, a course sequence at Barrett, The Honors College at Arizona State University provides a case study of using a program's history to understand its present and improve its future. While Barrett is situated at a public university with 76,000 students and is now a large college in itself with 4,803 honors students, it grew out of a much smaller program. From the beginning, The Human Event sequence has been a part of it and has contributed to its health and growth. Thus, the experience and insights drawn from considering its history might be of interest to honors programs and colleges of any size and at any institution as an example of what can be gained from studying the origin and development of signature classes.

## INCEPTION, INITIAL ORGANIZATIONAL FRAMEWORKS, AND INITIAL OBJECTIVES

The idea for The Human Event originated in the late 1970s when physicist Richard Jacob saw Jacob Bronowski's BBC series on PBS titled *The Ascent of Man*, an interesting and entertaining look at the development of Western culture. Richard Jacob, then Director of the Honors Program in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at ASU, was in a position to act on his perception that ASU needed to offer a similar series to its honors students. Although *The Ascent of Man* inspired the conversation and the title of the seminar sequence, Jacob desired something different from a Western Civilization course and certainly not a lecture course. He approached the chair of philosophy, Ted Humphrey, to help develop a two-semester freshman seminar to anchor his honors program's core curriculum. Humphrey had experience in teaching a replica of the University of Chicago's *Great Books of the Western World* year-long course as well as experience implementing a required six-quarter, two-year sequence modeled after Columbia University's great ideas course. When I arrived at Barrett, the terms "Chicago model" and "Columbia model" were occasionally bandied about, so I was curious about the difference, which I learned was rooted in the ways that courses are organized and the consequent impact on contexts and learning objectives.

### THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO MODEL

At the start of *Great Books of the Western World*, as compiled by philosopher Mortimer Adler and then-president of the University of Chicago Robert Hutchins, is a two-volume *Syntopicon* that is essentially a synthesis of topics, listing the concepts and the occurrences of each concept in the numerically ordered books to come. Thus, the University of Chicago's model, at least in the 1970s, was topic-based with a top-down "here's what we are going to teach you" approach. Humphrey reports that those who adopted the University of Chicago model followed one of two routes: (1) they took the students through the works serially, starting with the Greeks and studying the rest of Western culture as an increasingly detailed critique and development of the Greek foundation, or (2) they developed a more topical emphasis focusing on, say justice, starting with Plato and then Aristotle and other writers on justice, in or out of sequence. The second approach puts the *Syntopicon* to more use by taking any one of the big ideas and skipping around in the numbered books to examine it, not caring so much about the sequence of ideas as about the topic under discussion.

### THE COLUMBIA MODEL

Columbia University professor Paul Oskar Kristeller, a scholar of Renaissance Humanism, was a student of renowned philologist and classicist Werner Jaeger, who was a professor of Greek and Ancient Philosophy at the University of Chicago. Kristeller and his colleague John Herman Randall, Jr., a historian

of philosophy and signer of the “Humanist Manifesto,” thought differently from either Jaeger or Hutchins. Resonating more with the sequential approach, Kristeller and Randall strove to emphasize the strict historical development of ideas to the diminishment of the analytical and conceptual content. They stressed contextual influences and currents of thought at a given time and highlighted progress in the historical development of ideas. From this perspective, students had to understand the material conditions in which people lived and under which ideas arose and developed. The assumption was that understanding the great ideas depends entirely on understanding the material circumstances of their development and promulgation. Humphrey reports that, in thinking and teaching this way, Kristeller and Randall anticipated some of the more profound developments in historiography at the time.

## **INITIAL MODEL DEVELOPMENT FOR THE HUMAN EVENT**

With those two models in mind, we return to the development of The Human Event. Ted Humphrey conceived of this freshman honors sequence as a historically oriented course of ideas with a concern for context rather than as a topics-focused course. He privileged the history of ideas in the structure, focus, and methodology of the course because he was, at least at the start, far more influenced by the Columbia model than the Chicago model. Despite his extensive experience, he chose to include others who would ultimately be the first teachers of the course, and inevitably the disciplines of the earliest teachers influenced the content and organization. One of the first teachers, from 1977 to 1998, was a specialist in modern European history. Humphrey also recruited an expert in the history and philosophy of science to help develop and teach the sequence for a few years, starting in 1978, with an eye to integrating the sciences and the humanities. Humphrey himself did occasionally teach the sequence after becoming Director of the CLAS Honors Program in 1983, but he largely midwived the course from a distance until then. Competitive searches for core faculty specifically to teach The Human Event began after the University Honors College was officially formed in 1988 with Humphrey as the founding dean. At that time all other college honors programs at ASU were dropped or absorbed—most were fallow anyway—into the University Honors College. Clearly the move from a program to a college allowed for additional institutional support that rippled through to The Human Event and its faculty.

## **INITIAL LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

Remembering and documenting why a course was created is helpful in explaining its existence and benefits to stakeholders like faculty, administrators, parents, and students. As Humphrey conceived of the honors college and its core curriculum, he had several educational and developmental objectives in mind. First, he saw The Human Event sequence as an introduction to an honors education, i.e., to becoming an educated person who seeks to encounter, absorb,

and work with ideas. He intended for the course to establish an attitude and a community, providing an intellectual foundation for life, citizenship, and career, in that order. Second, he wanted the students to have a shared vocabulary and set of references as both would allow students to have a sense of connection with the past and one another, the latter helping to anchor the honors residential experience. To facilitate this community among students pursuing diverse majors, he secured multiple certifications for general studies requirements for each semester of the course. Third, he insisted on offering the course in seminar style so the faculty could assess student development *in media res*. Finally, limits on the size of class sections allowed faculty to monitor student affect and attendance with an eye to intervention should it seem warranted.

### THE HUMAN EVENT TODAY

Given the thoughtful work of the early founders, many features of The Human Event remain the same, yet it continues to develop with each generation of faculty and with the expansion of the college. The Human Event is still a two-semester honors freshman seminar that uses primary texts to explore great ideas from the earliest recorded history until approximately 1600 C.E. in the first semester and from about 1600 to modern texts in the second semester. The sequence comprises six of the thirty-six honors credits that students are required to take. The remaining thirty credits come from a combination of honors-students-only sections, “honors enrichment contracts” added to non-honors courses, and thesis credits. Slightly different versions of The Human Event course description have been used, but what the faculty most recently agreed on is:

The Human Event is an intensive, interdisciplinary seminar focusing on key social and intellectual currents in the development of humanity in its diversity. Students examine human thought and imagination from various perspectives including philosophy, history, literature, religion, science, and art. Coursework emphasizes critical thinking, discussion, and argumentative writing.

### GREAT BOOKS OR GREAT IDEAS?

While the sequence certainly includes many great books and demonstrates respect for the Western canon, The Human Event focuses more on great ideas than on great books. As intended from the start, it is more than a Western Civilization course, and many of the faculty spend a great deal of time sorting through historical texts that allow for the inclusion of under-represented voices in various categories that include gender, culture, social class, or perspective. Faculty also spend time considering translations. One could argue that a problem, at this juncture at least, with the Great Books approach—assuming one uses the *Great Books of the Western World* translations—is that it is largely assembled from public domain translations in order to make a collection affordable to the public. While many of these translations remain valuable and viable, they often

derive from a nineteenth-century British tradition of translation with the incumbent British-isms and partially antiquated English vocabulary. These translations are typically not the best for a contemporary college audience to whom post-1960 translations would be more accessible. Barrett faculty members enjoy many friendly arguments about the best translation of a particular text, and, fortunately, we are not forced to agree.

In fact, we value unity without uniformity. We do not use a common syllabus, but we do share course objectives that include close reading, critical thinking, emphasis on participatory class discussion, and argumentative writing. Some version of these objectives is found on all syllabi for The Human Event:

- Improve the student's ability to reason critically and communicate clearly.
- Cultivate the student's ability to engage in intellectual discourse through reading, writing, and discussion.
- Broaden the student's historical and cultural awareness and understanding.
- Deepen awareness of the diversity of human societies and cultures.
- Instill intellectual breadth and academic discipline in preparation for more advanced study.
- Improve the student's skill in expressing ideas, both orally and in writing, emphasizing use of textual evidence.

The fall-semester course extends from ancient times to approximately the Renaissance, and faculty might, for instance, include texts like *Gilgamesh*, *Code of Hammurabi*, *Theogeny*, *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *The Republic*, *the Apology of Socrates*, *Antigone*, *Tao Te Ching*, *The Analects*, *The Bhagavad-Gita*, *The Qur'an*, *Hebrew Bible*, *Popol Vuh*, *The Divine Comedy*, *Beowulf*, *Don Quixote*, *The Prince*, and material from authors like Sappho, Lucretius, Augustine, Aquinas, Chaucer, Christine de Pizan, Montaigne, Shakespeare, and Milton. Many of us struggle with depth (fewer texts) versus breadth (more texts), but we appreciate that we get to engage in that struggle and experiment. Faculty members choose what to assign in keeping with general guidelines, often with overlap between subsets of us but rarely between all of us. A beauty of the class is that it can work well with many different configurations of core texts, and faculty members continually grow and explore as they substitute different texts. The faculty members learn from each other about new texts, and, despite the absence of a fixed reading list, the students have a sense of a shared vocabulary. Many report being inspired to read new texts that their peers recommend.

## SIZE AND FORMAT

The courses were capped at nineteen until recently when the cap was increased to twenty-one, partly to accommodate growth until more faculty members could be hired and partly for curricular reasons. Keeping the course small helps maintain the seminar/discussion style. When I joined Barrett, I was

told that the goal is for faculty members to speak less than 30% of class time and to require student engagement with the texts in evidence-based discussion that improves their critical analysis, on-their-feet thinking, and public discourse skills. In league with the original vision, we care about improving the students' habits of mind and consequently enhancing the success and quality of their lives through modeling and practicing these habits in the context of intellectual traditions that span a wide variety of disciplines, eras, and cultures. We consider our methods Socratic but also open to differences in style. For example, some faculty aim to control the discussion of texts by asking the questions that students answer so that students discuss more with the professor than with each other. Others aim to honor the 30% guideline but admit struggling at times because they are the experts on the material and feel the students would benefit more from extended faculty exposition. The guideline was put in place, though, so that students can in a more organic way discover at least a handful of the same key points their professor could simply provide them.

From observing faculty teach and from numerous individual and group discussions, I think that many of us aim for class-wide discussions in which students do much of the heavy lifting, with the professor acting more as a facilitator or rudder when needed. The professor might offer some initial focus questions, jump into the discussion in order to correct mistaken details or assumptions, provide context when the students do not, or wrap up the day's discussion. For instance, Humphrey aims to speak fewer than ten minutes per class and grades himself on how much time he takes up. While students typically need to build up their confidence and skills in explicating a text, most honors students can quickly rise to meet a teacher's high expectations and shed their generation's fresh light on classic texts.

In terms of writing, most of us require either reading responses or reading journals as ways to assess preparation and comprehension or to help foster discussion—although some prefer the occasional quiz to keep students on their toes. The semester is also punctuated with argumentative writing that requires analysis of the readings, good use of evidence and logic, and counterargument. These assigned papers are not opinion pieces, nor are they research papers as no secondary texts are allowed. Our faculty have agreed that, while participation must count for no less than 20% of the final grade, argumentative writing must count for at least 50%.

## REVISITING ORGANIZATION

While Humphrey's original vision for the sequence at ASU was based on the Columbia model, he had new ideas after returning to a faculty role teaching *The Human Event*. He now advocates a Columbia-heavy approach with a touch of Chicago—a combination of both strategies that has over time evolved into our own "Barrett" approach. While a few faculty members experiment with pre-setting themes for their courses, the approach of gently developing conceptual archetypes or allowing them to develop organically is not as top-down as a

theme- or topic-driven course would be. This approach invites, if not requires, student inquiries and epiphanies rather than overly front-loading themes or topics from each text in the mode of the Syntopicon. Topics and themes sometimes arise organically and are revisited as the course develops, or the professor might loosely organize conceptual archetypes more than themes but retain the mostly chronological structure. An example of a conceptual archetype would be the human tendency to create in-groups and out-groups for sometimes flimsy reasons, noting what it is to be the “other” (noun) or to “other” (verb). A professor’s choice to revisit this concept throughout the course might help make the material more relevant to students because “othering” is part of their lives from the personal and family level to the political and international levels. While one might read *The Iliad* as an epic and read it in literary or historical terms, reading it as a foundational work in which a culture is “othered” changes the nature of discussion. Humphrey quotes Herodotus as saying “They do strange things over there,” and *The Iliad* shows Trojans doing strange things that no proper Greek would do, like violating laws of hospitality and, under the protection of a sojourner, going into a man’s house and seducing his wife.

The inclusion of more than Western texts in The Human Event sometimes influences how faculty organize their courses, enhancing the connective processes for our growing number of students from other cultures and allowing for important cultural comparisons in an increasingly global society. When students consider the ideas and questions that continue to perplex and engage us across time in both Western and non-Western traditions, they build an understanding of different family, cultural, regional, and/or national mythoi.

## THE “KNOWLEDGE DOMAINS” EXPERIMENT

Barrett faculty have experimented with a three-domain knowledge split in the spring-semester course. Starting in 2007, what used to be a single course (HON 172) from the Renaissance to modern times was split into focus areas:

HON 272: The Human Event (Humanities)

HON 273: The Human Event (Natural Sciences)

HON 274: The Human Event (Social Sciences)

The split helped address the explosion of texts during this period and the growing diversity of majors taking the course while still maintaining integration of the sciences and the humanities. The Table in the Appendix shows the substantial overlap between texts that faculty have chosen for these classes. This overlap reflects a general agreement that the disciplinary or interdisciplinary approach to a text, rather than just the text itself, helps shape the discussion. A psychologist and a biologist and a religious studies scholar could each include Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents* but facilitate discussion quite differently.

In general, the split worked fairly well but not as well as hoped because in some instances it introduced more problems than it solved, including added



bureaucracy and scheduling challenges. Additionally, students often mistakenly thought—despite verbal and printed information to the contrary—that they had to take the natural science focus if they were a natural science major even if they preferred to broaden their horizons. Some students wanted to take the same teacher they had in the fall but were afraid to take whatever domain that person offered in the spring, mistakenly thinking that, say, the natural science section would automatically be harder. Finally, some students thought that the natural science or social science sections would include no literary works when, in reality, each of the courses has a mix of the three domains of knowledge, which can include architecture, design, art, film, and music.

The faculty, too, faced challenges, sometimes feeling pigeon-holed into teaching a particular section when their constellation of degrees prepared them equally well to teach a different section. Some felt compelled to over-sample texts from their assigned domain of knowledge to deliver on the course title and not disappoint the students. Similarly, the split made it easy to slip into the comfort zone of one's disciplinary training and teach the section as an advanced course from that one domain of knowledge.

The experiment was worthwhile, and we may engage in others, but the faculty voted and the deans supported a return to the previous course structure, with the benefit of having learned from the effort. Barrett completed the last year of teaching the three-course split in the spring of 2013. Our intent now is to point students more consistently to faculty profiles and syllabi, and we share more about our particular perspectives so that students can get a sense of which professors might be a good fit for them in the second semester. The students can and often do switch teachers at semester break if they have a schedule conflict or want to experience a different professor's approach.

## THE FACULTY

One good consequence of our experiment with splitting domains of knowledge was that we gained a larger and more diversified faculty. In the early years of the CLAS Honors Program, the teachers were philosophers or historians, and a heavy leaning toward the humanities continued into the early and middle years of the college. Over time, especially in the thick of the knowledge domain experiment, Barrett conducted national searches for faculty to teach these types of classes who had PhDs, training, and/or background in the natural or social sciences, so we now have roughly a third of the faculty in each of the three major domains of knowledge. This diversity of disciplines represented along our faculty hallway is a benefit to both students and the faculty. The students benefit from access to career advice, to networking on and off-campus, and to more avenues into the larger faculty body at ASU, allowing for more thoughtful guidance on whom to approach as a thesis director or additional reader. The faculty members now have others nearby who might know more about certain topics and be able to guide them as they are considering new texts or encountering student questions.

Few faculty members have just the perfect intellectual or pedagogical background to teach *The Human Event*, but faculty members learn from each other in important ways through informal conversations and also faculty meetings. We have also had since 2005 a formal mentoring program for new faculty. We have experimented with different formats in the Barrett Faculty Mentoring Program for Teaching Excellence from assigning each mentee a specific mentor to having a range of faculty guide a mentee, but the program always includes two years of teaching support. For instance, mentees observe and are observed by experienced Barrett Honors Faculty Fellows multiple times each semester for at least the first three semesters, and the observations are discussed. Additionally, mentees and more senior faculty meet monthly to discuss teaching matters. Sometimes the agenda is open, but it is generally based on what mentees will need or want to know in the flow of the semester or on recent requests or concerns of mentees. Mentees often have questions about the quantity or diversity of texts to be assigned or about approaches to grading or classroom management. Faculty, whether new or experienced, benefit from the interchanges that occur in the mentoring program.

At this point, we have twenty-nine full-time Honors Faculty Fellows serving as the core faculty for Barrett. These faculty members are not part of a short-term Fellows program who stay for a semester or a year and then leave but rather are hired with the intent that they will stay as one would in any academic position. The Honors Faculty Fellows are not borrowed from other units but are hired after competitive national searches into Barrett, where they are housed, reviewed, and promoted by the faculty and leadership of the college, subject to review by the provost. Retention and promotion are based on teaching and service alone. While their teaching load is officially honors courses only, primarily *The Human Event* sequence, they can teach a senior seminar or an honors-only section of a disciplinary course in their field once per academic year, thus enriching the curricular variety for faculty and students alike. The current teaching load is generally four courses per semester, but most hope that, once our growth plateaus, the load will decrease a course per year, if not per semester. The key point here, though, is that the faculty members' primary dedication is to the honors students and that much of their time is spent with tasks related to *The Human Event* sequence. Our national searches, subsequent to the three-way knowledge domain split, are designed to attract the best teachers and maintain a diversity of disciplines.

A committed core faculty from multiple disciplines is central to the stability and growth of the college and to the positive feedback loop of *The Human Event* sequence. Beyond the disciplinary diversification of our faculty, we realize the benefits of institutional support and see that having core faculty, small classes, and a seminar format have led to the success of honors at ASU. Lessons of the past have taught us that thoughtful progenitors have anchored the content and organization of the course as well as a collaborative faculty development model. The positive impact of a dedicated core faculty is possibly the most enduring lesson from a historical consideration of the honors course sequence

development at ASU. Other honors programs and colleges might similarly benefit from delving into their roots and recognizing the roles of key players and innovations, of visions and revisions.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## APPENDIX

A Selection of Authors and Overlap Between HON 272, 273, and 274 during the Domain Split Experiment\*

HUMANITIES (HON 272)	NATURAL SCIENCES (HON 273)	SOCIAL SCIENCES (HON 274)
<b>Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau</b> Pope, Swift, Blake, <b>Voltaire</b> <i>Kant, Hume, Sartre</i> , Thoreau, <i>Nietzsche, Camus</i> Jefferson, Truth, Cady Stanton Douglass, Jacobs Descartes, <i>Galileo, Darwin, Snow,</i> <i>Heisenberg</i> <i>Smith, Marx, Sumner</i> <i>Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Stevenson,</i> Curie, <b>Freud</b> , Orwell, <b>Huxley</b> Hitler, <b>Arendt</b> , Levi, Gandhi Beaumarchais, Puccini Herrick, Wordsworth, Hughes, Walker, Browning, <b>Dickinson</b> <i>Shelley, Kafka, Woolf, McCourt, Achebe</i>	Bacon, <b>Descartes</b> , Copernicus <i>Galileo</i> , Newton Paley, <i>Darwin</i> , Huxley, Haeckel, Galton Vermeer <i>Kant, Hume, Smith</i> Goethe, <b>Voltaire</b> <i>Shelley, Huxley, Stevenson, Dostoevsky,</i> <i>Bulgakov</i> <i>Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, Arendt</i> <b>Dickinson</b> , Whitman, Hopkins Einstein, <i>Heisenberg</i> , Turing <b>Snow</b> , Nagel, Watson, Dawkins Lightman, Stoppard	<b>Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau</b> <i>Kant, Hume, Sartre</i> , Diderot <i>Smith, Jefferson</i> , deGouges, <b>Cady Stanton</b> <b>Douglass, Jacobs</b> , Appiah <i>Shelley</i> , Chekhov, Kafka, <b>Achebe</b> <b>Bulgakov</b> , Fanon <i>Nietzsche</i> , deBeauvoir, Hegel <b>Camus</b> , Foucault <b>Freud</b> , Frankl, Jung Durkheim, Weber, <b>Marx, Sumner</b> Goffman, Mead, <b>Arendt</b> <i>Galileo, Darwin, Snow, Heisenberg</i>

\* Bold = double overlap; Bold Italics = triple overlap

